Raymond Boudon

# The logic of social action

## An introduction to sociological analysis

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# Translator's introduction

Until fairly recently, the university teaching of sociology has been split quite rigidly between courses in sociological theory, sociological method and social structure. Rather like the teaching on multi-subject degrees, it was hoped to offer self-contained, internally coherent courses and to leave the student to make the intellectual links between them.

In many cases, this may have turned out to be an unsatisfied hope. It has produced generations of students who have some idea of what, say, Durkheim or Weber argued in a particular book and a little understanding of research techniques and some of the basic data on social institutions. But require any one of them to generate a researchable problem or even to ask a sociological question and you would probably be disappointed.

The basic failing arises not in our students but in our teaching. So long as sociology is basically taught as a history of ideas, it is too much to ask students to make the leap from the classic text to the real world. The incapacity of our students to reason sociologically, all too visible when even the brightest of their number seek to sort out a research problem for graduate work, is entirely a learned incapacity.

Only in the last few years has this pedagogic error been widely recognised and remedied. Instead of the teaching of theory, method or structure, there are emerging courses in sociological *analysis*. Such courses are not primarily concerned with teaching ideas but with encouraging an ability to reason sociologically. This is not to say that the founders of the discipline are ignored or that anti-intellectualism prevails. But it does mean that the central problematic will turn on the generation and answer of sociological problems rather than on the inculcation of ideas which seem to exist nowhere outside the context of undergraduate courses in sociology. At last the old ques-

tions which have tortured generations of sociology students, only to be immediately forgotten ('Is sociology a science?', 'Can sociology be value-free?', 'Is Weber an idealist?'), are being peacefully laid to rest. It is the principal merit of this book that it offers the discipline to the beginning student from the perspective of sociological *analysis*.

Raymond Boudon, Professor of Sociology at the University of Paris, already has a reputation based on his work on sociological method and, more especially, on the link between educational opportunities and social mobility. That work is characterised by a commitment to empirical research, largely in the quantitative mode and to a position that has become called *methodological individualism* because it argues that statements about society should *in principle* be reducible to statements about individuals (an example of this position is Boudon's argument that theories like Durkheim's which explain suicide rates by reference to states of society have to be restated in terms of the kind of motivations that individuals, in a given situation, might experience).

It ought at once to be made clear that these commitments do not in the least make this book inaccessible to the innumerate reader or to the reader who has little time for obscure theoretical debates. First, the quantitative data that Boudon uses is of a very simplified nature and always supplemented by everyday examples of the phenomena to which it refers. Second, the theoretical argument about methodological individualism is largely confined to a few odd paragraphs. The continuing theme of the book, which emerges much more from near-to-hand examples than from obscure theoretical speculation, is that sociological analysis is concerned with the encounter between individuals and society.

One of Boudon's own examples can be used to show his basic argument on this theme. In the 1960s, there was an outbreak of protest on American campuses against the university system. However, surprisingly, the level of protest was greatest in the high-status universities. At first sight, this seems surprising, given that students at prestigious universities would appear to have less to protest about than students elsewhere. However, consider these points:

1 There is much mobility between universities by university staff.

2 Academics who are beginning to 'make their name' in their discipline will try to move into the prestigious universities.

3 These universities will offer incentives, such as light teaching loads, to attract talented candidates.

4 In the nature of things, 'talent' is much more visible in relation to research and publications than in relation to teaching ability.

5 The best universities are, therefore, likely to have a relatively high proportion of staff whose major interest is research. Hence they are likely to interpret their teaching role in the most restrictive possible way.

6 So the staff pay limited attention to their students. Since these students are talented and recruited on the basis of tough selection procedures, they feel aggrieved.

7 The staff remain reluctant to alter their ways and, since their primary interest is research, may play very little part in the representative bodies of the university and so fail to discover until too late the discontent among the student population.

As Boudon points out, this example reveals clearly the link between individuals' behaviour and particular forms of social organisation. The beliefs that people have arise in the context of a system of interaction. This system provides rewards (the status of a prestigious university) but also a set of constraints (from the students' point of view, the staff's lack of interest in teaching). All the participants are 'rational' in that they try to follow their own interest by what seem to be appropriate means. But this rationality is 'bounded' by the constraints of the system and thus has unintended consequences. So the bright student works hard for the entrance examinations to a university which has many famous staff. In doing so, his behaviour seems to be rational. However, he has not reckoned with the method of staff recruitment and reward at such institutions. After working so hard, he finds he has very little contact with the staff about whom he has heard so much.

This book is filled with examples of this kind and with invented instances (games and lotteries) which help the reader to follow the argument. They also show that Boudon is principally concerned to convey the character of sociological analysis as carried out in practice. Hence what follows is neither a history of sociological thought, nor a systematic discussion of sociological findings. Boudon attempts to work from questions rather than from a set of established 'truths'. The prime contribution of this approach is that it should allow the student to generate his own questions when considering social phenomena.

I will later conclude these introductory remarks by seeking to

locate Boudon's position within the mainstream of sociological thought. However, before doing so, it may be of some help to the reader to offer a brief summary of each of the chapters of this book.

Chapter 1 introduces Boudon's theme of the relation between individual and society by reference to two classical sociological theories by Pareto and Durkheim. He shows the contrast between Pareto's 'active' subject and Durkheim's 'passive' subject, the latter reduced to a mere product of social forces. However, Boudon argues, against the conventional sociological position, that Durkheim's propositions are reducible to statements about individuals' motivations. So Durkheim's position is, after all, compatible with methodological individualism. Hence, Boudon suggests, it is wrong to argue that Durkheim ends up by treating 'society' as a living organism with a will of its own. Durkheim is only trying to show that systems of social relations have real consequences and exercise unavoidable constraints. Boudon concludes this chapter by arguing that there is a basic consensus in sociological method between Pareto, Durkheim and Weber. Like Talcott Parsons, who in *The Structure of Social Action* located this consensus in the concern with 'social action', Boudon finds a consensus in their common interest in decision-making within a set of external constraints, including non-rational elements.

Chapter 2 is concerned with sociology's relation to history. Both disciplines explain individual facts but sociology seeks to build a model of a system of interaction which takes account of structurally-produced unintended consequences. This is illustrated with a number of examples ranging from Sombart's classic work on the absence of a sizeable socialist movement in the United States to Robert Merton's more recent study of American racism. The latter offers a good illustration of the creation of a self-fulfilling prophecy in social relations. American blacks who travelled North to seek work were kept out of more highly paid jobs and forced to take work in the lowly paid non-union sector. This allowed white trade unionists to argue that blacks made bad unionists and so to strengthen their discrimination against them. Once again, Boudon uses such examples to argue that we must begin by analysing the 'bounded' rationality of social actors: he is concerned with the ends pursued by actors and the unintended consequences of their action caused by a particular structure of social interaction.

Chapter 3 introduces the concept of social *role*. The work of Michel Crozier on relations between groups of workers and execu-

tives is used to show the constraints of role-systems and there is a telling reference to Goffman's account in *Asylums* of the pressures placed by a medical setting upon a new mental patient's next-of-kin. Trying to do his best for his relative, the next-of-kin is nonetheless encouraged to adopt a more and more medicalised definition of the patient. This chapter also examines and challenges the functionalist account of role. Functionalism was the dominant perspective in sociology in the twenty years after 1945. It sought to argue that the meaning of social institutions was to be discovered from the 'function' they played in social order. As such, it was criticised for overemphasising the consensual elements in social life. In particular Dennis Wrong, in a famous article, suggested that it offered an 'oversocialised' conception of man. Boudon agrees with Wrong by noting that roles are often ill-defined and composite, sometimes relating to contradictory norms. Hence a role defines only a field of strategic interaction. The degree of uncertainty and unequal knowledge between actors allows a measure of individual autonomy in interpreting and changing roles. (Around here, Boudon's argument is very close to my own account of 'action theory' in Chapter 6 of *The Theory of Organizations*, London: 1970.)

Chapter 4 further weakens the saliency of the role concept by setting out situations where action is directly attributable to individual choice rather than to societal role. However, the *unintended* consequences of such choice are shown to be fruitful areas for sociological investigation. The work of Simmel on the unintended consequences of exchange relations, Marx on the falling rate of profit and Michels's Iron Law of Oligarchy all serve to make the point.

Chapters 5 and 6 accurately set out the differences between nineteenth- and twentieth-century accounts of social change: from unicausal, evolutionary change in terms of the needs of systems to multicausal, multidirectional changes viewed as emergent effects of motivated individual action. Three processes of change are distinguished, using the variables of Environment, System of Interaction, and Consequences:

1 Processes of repetition (no feedback between the three variables – example: traditional agricultural societies).

2 Cumulative processes (feedback on system of interaction of consequences – example: Marshall and Dahrendorf on the generation of needs in the welfare state).

3 Processes of transformation (feedback to both interaction *and* environment – example: class conflict).

There is also some discussion of cyclical social change and exogeneous factors in change.

Chapter 7 gives an account of the relation between description and explanation in sociological analysis with reference to research on class background and educational performance. The tendency of working-class children to be early leavers is seen to apply only among those defined as having average or less ability. Among these groups, the costs of staying on loom large compared to children of middle-class origins. This micro-sociological account of educational choice has two useful functions:

1 It introduces the student to the task of correlation between variables and shows the need to avoid spurious correlations.
2 It shows the inter-relation of problems of theory and method, and of meaning and cause within the research process itself.

Chapter 8 suggests that its topic is epistemological problems in sociology, i.e. the problem of the nature of social 'reality'. It disappoints somewhat since it is really only a restatement of the author's position on bounded rationality. The chapter concludes by showing, in the familiar way, that the method of *verstehen* or intuitive understanding of intention is not opposed to objectivity and that structures and roles are not incompatible with personal liberty.

Having outlined Boudon's pedagogic style and purpose and set out the main contents of his book, I will conclude by some comments on the contribution made by the *The Logic of Social Action* to sociological analysis.

In translating this book, I was struck by the parallels between Boudon's own concerns and the position that I took in *The Theory of Organizations*. There is a similar critique of functionalism and the emphasis on 'bounded' rationality is common to both works. However, I am obliged to say that Boudon offers a more developed account of the 'action' position, especially in Chapter 5, and is able to incorporate very neatly the crucial issue of the unintended consequences of social action. It also has to be said that *The Logic of Social Action* does not altogether overcome the problems of the social action perspective. If one begins analysis with an account of the ends of the actor how does one ever reach the social system, and vice

versa? This dilemma arises most clearly when Boudon needs to talk about the constraints of the social system. As a good methodological individualist, such constraints have to be referred back to the perceptions of individuals. But, as he recognises, elsewhere, 'structures of interdependence' can define these constraints outside the perception of any one individual. The dilemmas that Durkheim posed in the 1890s about the relation between society and the individual remain as real today. Or perhaps the whole dichotomy, as Marx suggested fifty years before Durkheim, is itself a product of a particular social formation?

More important than the link with 'social action' theory is the strangely 'un-French' tone that runs throughout this work. It is true that Boudon is at his best using homely examples likely to appeal to the down-to-earth Frenchman. Yet his intellectual position owes very little to his fellow countrymen or to the continental tradition of 'grand theory'. The dominant French tradition (structuralism) is mentioned only once and then only as an example of a fashionable ideology. Critical theory, that neo-Hegelian offshoot of Marxism, is mentioned briefly, only to be summarily dismissed. Boudon's position owes far more to the Anglo-American tradition of Merton and Lazarsfeld, founded upon the neo-Kantian philosophy of science of Karl Popper.

This then is a French book which is, in one sense, particularly appropriate to an English-speaking audience. The English reader will find here a position which indulges in none of those theoretical flights of fancy which he finds so hard to comprehend and yet offers, as already suggested, a new style of introductory text, concerned with sociological analysis and practice rather than with the empty repetition of what the founding fathers said.

Hopefully, the English reader will not be put off a later encounter with structuralist and other traditions which, perhaps, have more to offer than Boudon implies. In the meantime, however, he is provided here with that rare commodity – an introductory text that sets its readers along the path to *independent* thought.

My wife Gillian Silverman knows how much of this translation was dependent on her careful reading and help. Any errors that remain are entirely my own.

D.S.
London 1980

# Preface

This book aims to be an introduction to sociological analysis. It does not pretend in any way to give an overall view of sociological work. Such work is very varied, very profuse and deals with the most diverse subjects. It is, therefore, impossible and probably uninteresting to claim to present an overall view. This is not a history of sociology, nor even a presentation of the contribution of the founding fathers. I have instead undertaken to present as exact, clear, and concrete an idea as possible of the intentions of sociologists and of the nature of their activities, at least as I perceive them.

Certainly, the outsider might get the impression that the word 'sociology' covers varied natural and human products. This impression is, in part, justified and is more likely to arise when one considers sociological work from close up. But, as soon as one distances oneself in time and space, that impression blurs, at least to a certain extent. One then discovers an implicit definition of sociology which can be considered to be shared by the majority of sociologists. In seeking to establish that common definition, trying to go beyond provincial and fashionable definitions, I have decided to draw my examples from a number of different times and national contexts.

This book, therefore, deals with the principles, postulates and objectives of sociological analysis rather than with the history or the data of sociology. From another point of view, limitations of space have made me confine myself to a work which is introductory or, more precisely, *elementary*. I mean that I have tried to present the elements that I feel must be assimilated before undertaking a sociological analysis. But these indispensable elements are, at the same time, insufficient.

Thus, I have not even tried to deepen the analysis of symbolic

aspects of social life. I have not discussed the sociology of beliefs, myths or ideologies. On the other hand, I have tried to describe, following the pointers of Durkheim, Weber and Pareto, the essential postulates from which the sociologist can hope to explain these phenomena.

Without involving myself too deeply in this question, I would like to say a word in order to concretise the limitations that I have imposed on myself. In this chapter, I have tried to suggest one essential proposition, that beliefs are only intelligible from an analysis of the structure of the system of interaction in which they appear. This abstract proposition can be illustrated by the simple example of the puppet of Spencer and Durkheim.

A child treats his puppet as if it were a human being: he speaks to it, punishes it, cajoles it, flatters it, preaches to it. He uses his mother as a witness to the puppet's bad character.

A banal evolutionary interpretation: the child does not yet distinguish clearly the different categories of beings. An interactionist sociological interpretation: the child acts *as if* the puppet were a living being; his mother agrees to play the game. The social conditions are, therefore, united so that the child is able to treat the puppet as a living being in front of his mother. However, the child vaguely realises that his father would not like him to pretend that puppets were children. Hence, if the father were to appear, the game would then be brutally interrupted and the puppet would find itself relegated to a corner as the vulgar collection of pieces of material that it is. In fact, the child never believed that it was anything else, for he would have been very surprised if the puppet to whom he preached had suddenly become really alive, starting to scratch him and pinch him.

The child-with-puppet is placed in a situation which permits him to distance himself in relation to his beliefs: the child-mother system of interaction, on the one hand, the system of interaction between child and father, on the other, confers on the puppet contrasting statuses. The child has, therefore, every reason to know that the puppet *isn't* a living being (he would be very surprised if his mother were to give him proof that she was treating the puppet as if it *really* were the same kind of being as himself). But he knows also (and his father appears, on this point, to be singularly short-sighted) that a puppet can also be something other than a collection of pieces of material. For the child, the puppet also represents a means of deter-

mining the reactions of his mother should he behave in the same way as the puppet. The puppet can be used as an effective technique to prolong the attention that the mother devotes to the child in order to make him smile.

The example of the puppet contains several fundamental explanatory principles which are applicable to all those phenomena relating to belief. It is not by chance that the example is used in Durkheim's book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. It contains in fine detail Pareto's theory of ideologies: the status of living being conferred on the puppet by the child is, in Pareto's language, absurd from a *logico-experimental* point of view but is of considerable importance from the point of view of its *social utility*. Using another language, the puppet plays an important role in the functioning of the system of interaction made up of the child and his two parents.

Taking my cue to a certain extent from Pareto, I have tried as well to suggest the importance in the explanation of symbolic phenomena of the ambiguity and uncertainty which characterise certain situations: the smoker or the gambler who must decide between the short-term advantages and the long-term disadvantages of his addiction, the politician who must choose between the contradictory advantages and inconveniences of two policies, are all placed in situations which prompt them to produce symbolic systems.

Going one step further, I have tried to show, with the aid of several more complex examples, the dependence of symbolic systems upon social and institutional structures. Thus I have used, in passing, certain examples through which one can see that the 'style' of certain intellectual works is affected by the structure of the apparatus of intellectual production.

In sum, I have purposely limited myself in this chapter on the analysis of symbolic phenomena to those propositions which appear to me to be the most elementary and essential.

The same remarks could be made about other points taken up in the book, including the two which are given a specific treatment. As regards the analysis of social change, I have not tried to do more than present a general, assorted group of illustrations. It is evident, for example, that the few pages that I have devoted to processes of 'oscillation' do not constitute a complete treatment of the problem. The same applies to the notion of the 'system of interdependence'. In this regard, I have confined myself to bringing out the simple idea

that the social actor has a tendency to explain the appearance of undesirable social states by referring to a conspiracy of cynical and all-powerful social groups, to distance himself from his own feelings, often discovers that these states are the unintended result of intentional actions. That elementary and fundamental idea has, of course, been expressed by the majority of sociologists. For Marx, for example, 'men make history but not as they choose'. But it is clear that one could develop this analysis. A classification, however summary, of the unintended effects of intentional actions would have the greatest utility. Up to this day, it has been scarcely attempted.

It must be understood that the reader will not find here any attempt to deal systematically with many topics which would normally be acceptable in a sociological treatise: stratification, mobility, social conflicts, types of groups, etc. But he will find several elementary propositions to help him find his bearings in these areas.

The objective and limits of the book thereby noted, I will say something about its organisation.

The first two chapters deal with the implicit object of sociology. Given the same objectives as the historian, the sociologist addresses different questions. To reply to the questions that he asks himself, the sociologist has forged a logic, which has neither the rigour nor the simplicity nor, doubtless, the stability of that of the economist, but whose existence appears incontestable.

Chapters 3 and 4 represent an introduction to static analysis in sociology. Two fundamental notions are proposed there: the system of interaction and the system of interdependence. These two chapters are devoted to a presentation and an illustration of these two notions.

Chapters 5 and 6 are an introduction to the analysis of social change or, if you prefer, to social dynamics. Three fundamental types of processes are distinguished and illustrated here: reproductive processes, cumulative processes and transformative processes. Taking this path, it has been necessary to deal with the response of modern sociology to the classical problems of the philosophy of history.

Chapters 7 and 8 are more general. The first deals with the movement between description and explanation in sociology. The second returns to the problem of the implicit logic of sociology and of the epistemological postulates of sociological analysis.

It goes without saying that I do not consider this introduction to

sociology as the only one possible. I have tried to develop here a *point of view*. I believe that this point of view is fruitful, and can be shared with other sociologists. I believe that it is not incompatible with other points of view – Peter Berger's *Invitation to Sociology* and Norbert Elias's *What is Sociology?* offer two brilliant examples. The plurality of points of view appears to me a necessary condition of the development of sociology, as, doubtless, of any discipline.

I would like to express my gratitude to François Bourricaud, François Chazel, Mohamed Cherkaoui and Jean Padioleau for their useful and stimulating remarks on the manuscript. I thank Jacqueline Lécuyer and Pierrette Andrès for their patience and their invaluable help.

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